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Dan Walters: Rep. Henry Waxman's retirement closes circle on powerful political apparatus



Dan Walters

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Published: Thursday, Jan. 30, 2014 - 10:33 pm

Last Modified: Friday, Jan. 31, 2014 - 12:03 am

There was a time, a quarter-century ago, when an organization headed by California Reps. Henry Waxman and Howard Berman

wielded virtual control of Los Angeles politics and very strong influence in Sacramento, Washington

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and other political venues.

The wealthy, Democratic west side of Los Angeles, including Santa Monica and Beverly Hills, was the organization's base, from which it nurtured a political stable in the rest of the region, including Latinos and African-Americans.

The Waxman-Berman apparatus, often described as a "machine," had an in-house campaign team run by Berman's brother, Michael, who pioneered microtargeting voters (sometimes with potholders) and campaign fund bundling and whose expertise on redistricting was a powerful tool.

Howard Berman had come within an eyelash of the state Assembly speakership in 1980 before segueing into Congress, where he and Waxman used political acumen and prodigious fundraising to become chairmen of committees on foreign policy and energy.

As the organization reached the zenith of its political power in the early 1990s, however, it suffered a couple of big setbacks. A Republican governor, Pete Wilson, vetoed a legislative and congressional redistricting plan drafted, in part, by Michael Berman, throwing the issue into the courts. And a Waxman-Berman acolyte, Mel Levine, fared poorly in a U.S. Senate bid.

Bit by bit, the partnership's power slipped away in the 1990s, in part because Los Angeles County politics were changing and the Latino-dominated county labor federation was becoming its power center.

Michael Berman played a major role in drafting the Legislature's 2001 redistricting plan, a bipartisan gerrymander that protected Howard Berman's seat by fragmenting Latino voters, but otherwise didn't advance the organization's interests.

The backlash to that plan fueled a ballot measure to shift redistricting from the Legislature to an independent commission, and the plan it drew after the 2010 census threw Howard Berman into the same district as another congressman, Brad Sherman, sparking a fierce duel in 2012 and a humiliating Berman loss.

On Thursday, Waxman announced that he would not run for a 21st term in Congress, completing the rise and fall of the organization and, perhaps, confirming that Democrats may be ceding continued control of the House to Republicans and shifting their resources to retaining control of the U.S. Senate.

His retirement also touches off what will likely be a frenzied scramble among the many political figures along the Los Angeles County coast, including those already gearing up to vie for an open seat on the county's Board of Supervisors and perhaps termed-out Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky – himself one of the many politicians who owe their careers to Waxman and Berman.

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